BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

OCTOBER 13, 2002

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

When I resigned as the pastor of this church in the late spring of 1974, in order to accept the call of the Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio, it brought to a bittersweet conclusion what Sue and I know was one of the most important chapters in our lives. Certainly one of the happiest — 1966 to 1974 were sweet years for us. We loved our home, our friends, the community and this wonderful congregation. On my last Sunday I preached a sermon entitled "Time Flies When You're Having Fun." The phrase

actually came from a YMCA workout regiment that Dave Biery and I used to attend. In the middle of a particularly excruciating callisthenic the Director of the Y himself, Bill Smith, used to say — "Time Flies When You're Having Fun." We laughed — time can't go quickly enough when you're trying to hold your feet 12 inches off the floor. But Bill was right of course. Time filled with meaningful activity, satisfying relationships, challenging work — and joy, lots of joy, does have a way of flying by.

My mother — who also loved Lafayette and Bethany Church — read that sermon and said it was "a love letter" which it was. Mother and Dad visited us here, met our friends and when Dad died in

1968, the first real loss in my life, and my first personal experience with grief, this congregation ministered to me — and mother kept returning to visit and you gathered her in, too, in a unique and wonderful way. So it was a love letter and over the years since we have treasured the Lafayette years — each of us has: Sue and I — who were all of 28 years old when we arrived. Diane and Susan who began school at Cravel School and Sunnyside Jr. High. John and Andrew who were toddlers and who became life-long Boilermaker fans and can still recite all the starting lineups and relevant statistics of the Gary Danielson, Otis Armstrong, Rick Mount years; and who spent their Sundays at church trying to elude Jim Small — who after he retired from Morton Salt —

devoted full-time to being church treasurer and custodian and trouble shooter. John and Andy, after church, during the coffee hour, used to belly crawl under the pews from back to front — often joined by others — David Hendrix I recall. And Brian, who first saw the light of day at Home Hospital and was baptized here — by James Warren Sala, a Regional Presbyter and the denominational Patron Saint of this church who lovingly shepherded it through some difficult times, who put us in touch wit you and was my counselor, friend, advisor and father — in the faith.

We held our own and actually grew a little, experimented for a while with two services, studied and wrote our own Covenant of Church Membership; our

youth programs thrived and we made something of a name for ourself with our transportation program which brought volunteers with cars together with elderly and needy people who needed transportation to the grocery store or Doctor's office. Bethany was in many ways the most ecumenical church in Lafayette, active in ecumenical activities and supportive of community initiatives in race relations, housing and poverty programs. An active _____ group brought married couples together for a monthly dinner and program and was the context for strong and meaningful friendships. Our entry in the YMCA church basketball league — affectionately called the Bethany Bombers, most of its games I recall, but occasionally reached respectability.

And Bethany's scout troops were among the most active in the community. One of the minister's duties annually was to drive out to the scout camp early one May morning — in the dark I recall — to lead worship and preach to several hundred tired, cold and utterly disinterested Cub scouts.

We fixed the place up a bit. Painted and carpeted the sanctuary, rebuilt the entrances, paved the parking lot and put the huge Celtic cross on the building.

There are more names than time allows me to mention and if I tried I would surely forget many — but among my Saints for whose friendship I will always thank God — are:

Evah Belle Newton my first secretary – who helped me get started and Doyle — close friends

Anne Glade — who took time off from her life's vocation of turning the community and nation into a Democratic Party paradise to be my administrative assistant and John — again life-long friends.

Sandy Leverenz — and Jim her husband, wonderfully _____.

Jim and Marian Small — Jim, already mentioned, Marian — who kept and tended to a small botanical garden — and who regularly — in her 70's — came to water and fertilize and cultivate in her college gym suit.

Don Wallick — severely wounded World War II vet who was funny and kind and committed: and Pauline who directed the choir and who sang very serious and good music — George FrederickHandel: "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

Bill and Babe Taylor — loyal and good friends.

Phil and Mary Crane

Leon and Carol Fletcher

Charlie and Rachel Hendrix

Virgil and Myrtle Myers

Curt and Mary Courtney

There were many, many more — whose presence in our lives continues.

And Dave and Thelma Biery, best friends who shared our life and immeasurably enriched our life with their love.
Time really does fly when you're having fun.

Fifty years.

How many were here then? Charter members.

It was a remarkable time — 1952 — just seven years after the end of World War II: a time we now understand as the end of an era, a distinct chapter in American history — with more in common, in many ways — with the year 1900 than with the new millennium.

It was the last growth surge for mainline churches in our nation. There are a lot of Presbyterian Churches between 40 and 50 years old, organized, founded and constructed during the 1950's.

50 years — that's 2600 Sunday worship services — that's 833 hours of preaching — if your preachers limited themselves to 20 minutes consistently — which I know I didn't — so make it 850 hours. That's a lot of preaching — and I'm asking that one more sermon won't hurt you a bit.

We're here to celebrate a church, but it's more common these days to criticize the church.

It's the easiest target in the world, the church is. It always has been. Among institutions, none has higher aspirations or a more ambitious mission statement, and none, consequently, misses the mark by a wider margin than the church. It is so easy to criticize the church, dismiss the church as irrelevant. Sociologist are telling us that modern — or postmodern religion is and will be an individual matter, not institutional. One of the most important of these sociologists of religion, Wade Clark Roof, calls the United States, *A Nation of Seekers*, not joiners. Spirituality is

the rage, a privatized quest for God, meaning, happiness, or at least good feelings — which has less and less to do with religion as we know it, particularly institutional religion. "I'm a spiritual person," Americans are inclined to say. "But I'm not religious." Which means: "I read books on spirituality, write in a journal about my spiritual journey, practice deep breathing and meditation before breakfast, and watch Oprah, but I don't go to church."

People who do go to church, who express their spirituality institutionally,

people who know the church intimately — have a lover's quarrel with it.

Author Annie Dilliard—

> **"What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians (the church)." (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* p.36, Edited by Alfred Corn)**

The English poet Southey:

> **"I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church." (William**

Willimon, *What's Right With the Church,* p.3)

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke and former parish pastor —

> **"Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved…For most of us the church is an embarrassment." (p. 3, 13)**

Bill Gates, just certified again as the richest man in the world and therefore granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well—

“Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There’s a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning.”

And on that same topic, Willimon tells about a church visitation team from his Methodist parish calling on a young woman who said that she did not like ‘organized religion’ and a team member replied, “Well, you’ll be happy at Northside Church: we’ve been trying for thirty years but we ain’t got it organized yet.” (Ibid p.36)

It is the easiest target in the world — the church is and always has been. But sometimes, mostly in ways that are not conspicuous or dramatic, the church is what God calls it to be—an incarnation, an embodiment of Jesus Christ and his love in the world. When that happens, the church is unspeakably beautiful and magnificent. Bethany Presbyterian Church is never more beautiful, never more the Body of Christ in the world, never more the church than when the homeless, the marginal, the outcasts are included, whenever by God's grace

— some deep hunger is fed, some sickness healed, some grief comforted.

I got out a scrap book Sue kept and in it found a note from a young man, a brilliant young college student, son of church members — who had very, very serious liver disease. He was so smart and much of the time so sick. He sat with his parents on Sunday mornings, his face swollen because of the powerful drugs he was taking to help his liver function. He knew, with an amazing integrity, how sick he was and how bleak the future looked. Yet here he was

in church — supported by his family and the larger family of this congregation. We talked regularly — about life and death and hope. And then the most amazing thing happened. He fell in love and they came to see me and said "We want to be married." And I cleared my throat and hemmed and hawed and he said "I know — I know: I'm dying. We both know that we don't have much time and we want to be married. So we talked to his parents and we planned a wedding and he got sicker and sicker — in the hospital now, with all kinds of tubes and needles in his body. We

made it — and he died not long afterward. And in my scrapbook is the note he wrote from the hospital in his neat hand — dated May 20, 1973.

He wrote:

> **“Because of my health our future is uncertain. In fact, as we stand before you on Sunday, we will both be hoping that I have enough physical strength to make the walk down the aisle, greet our guests, and reach the nearest bed to lie down before falling down.**

Because of the love we have experienced here — we will face the future — however much of it there is — with more hope than ever before possible."

Sometimes the church of Jesus Christ in quiet, almost invisible ways — becomes the Body of Christ in the world.

Michael Lindvall, just called to Brick Church, New York City, good friend, popular author and storyteller, writes out of his own experience as the minister of a small town church in

Minnesota. In a wonderful piece called "Our Organist," he tells about being a guest supply preacher for a little church up in Carthage Lake, a mythical town which for years has been declining in population…Only a few of the old timers are left. The Carthage Lake church hasn't had a minister of its own since 1939. But a handful of people hold on, and gather one Sunday a month, at noon, for Sunday School and worship with whatever preacher they can convince to come to Carthage Lake. The Clerk of the congregation, Lloyd Larson, tells him that there are only eleven

members, but they'll all be there. "And he promised an organist, the same organist Carthage Lake has been promising guest preachers for 60 years, Lloyd's sister-in-law, Agnes Rigstad.

The Sunday of his guest appearance arrived and Michael describes the small white frame building, the large sentimental stained glass windows of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, lamb in one arm, staff in the other and Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, two

cars and a pick-up truck are parked out front.

There were twelve worshippers, actually, including a young man, scattered throughout the sanctuary, sitting in their customary pews. Lloyd explained that there was no bulletin, that the preacher should just announce the hymns. Michael nodded to the organist, with her wig slightly askew, who responded with a broad smile.

Worship began. Michael announced the opening hymn, #204, Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart— Agnes smiled at him and played "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". The eleven elderly members sang by memory. Only the young man used a hymnal.

Following the sermon, Michael announced the next hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." He looked directly at Agnes who smiled back and played, "I Love to Tell the Story of Jesus and His Love."

After the prayers and offering, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down and whispered, "Agnes, what are we going to sing?" She smiled and began to play "Just as I Am, Without One Plea."

After worship, Agnes shook his hand but didn't say a word. Lloyd sheepishly explained: "Forgot to tell you about Agnes . . .You don't need to tell us <u>what</u> the hymn is, only <u>when</u>. Agnes only knows those

three hymns, so we always sing ‘em.”

“Good grief, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you’ve been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?” Lloyd was concentrating on the frayed sanctuary carpet. ‘We like those hymns well enough, and we known em by heart . . . .And she’s our organist. . . .”

Later, Michael met the young man, Neil Larson, Lloyd’s grandson, who explained, “Agnes is my late

grandmother's little sister, Lloyd's wife's baby sister. Agnes has never been quite right. She never says more than a few words . . . But she learned to play those hymns in one week 60 years ago when the regular organist got sick. It was a moment of musical emergency. Anyway, she hasn't been able to learn one since. Playing the organ this one Sunday a month means the world to her. Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the church open. Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of the month."

“I will show you a still more excellent way,” St. Paul wrote to the little Christian church in Corinth. It was a church not acting like a church is supposed to act, which is to say, acting like the church often acts; arguing, disputing, name calling, making a spectacle of itself, discrediting the Gospel.

I’ll show you a better way, Paul said. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal; if I give

away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Paul draws on a word and a concept from Greek literature, Agape—an attitude of self-giving, a way of relating that regards the needs of the other, or the community, before personal needs. Agape is a big concept. It doesn't have much to do with feelings at all. It has a lot to do with how people relate to one another in community, which means it is primarily a social and political word.

There is a better way to relate than the normal human mode of relating with others based on self-preservation first, then self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, self-actualization. Self—Self—Self. That's how human societies, human institutions work—by addressing my needs as an individual. Our economic engine is built on it—an economic machine designed to produce and allow me to purchase whatever I want, or whatever I have become convinced that I need to be fulfilled and happy.

There is an alternative way of thinking Paul proposes. It is radically counter culture in the first century and the 21st century. This way was actually lived out once, in the world, in human history, in a human being. Jesus of Nazareth who Paul asserts was God's only son, the embodiment of the reality and mystery of God. He was a man for others. He lived out his life on behalf of others. He gave his life away. That's who God is, Paul is saying, not some Olympian figure, muscular, sitting on a mighty throne, casting thunderbolts or frowning in judgment at human

misdeeds, judging, condemning. No—God is here—this one does not condemn—this one who gives life away for others. This one who says "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek"—this one who says, "if you save your life you lose it, if you give your life away in my name, you will find it"—this one who follows the way of Agape to the end, dying on a cross, Christ crucified.

And what does human behavior look like which has been challenged and converted and reshaped by this one and

his love? What does the community of believers look like in the world?

Agape—love—the new life lived in the world, by individuals and collectively by the community of believers which Paul, significantly calls the "body of Christ" … is:

- **Patient and kind**
- **Not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude**

This radical, counter culture way does not insist on its own way, does not

rejoice in wrong-doing, rejoices rather, in the truth.

Love is not afraid of anything. Love is not afraid to tell the truth and to live in the truth. Love is not afraid to break with conventional and cultural custom. Love isn't afraid to take risks, to reach over racial, economic, religious, or gender: love takes chances in offering hospitality to those who are marginalized, kept out, scorned by the world. Love, in the name of Jesus Christ, is always more worried about

who is excluded than who is included. Love is not weak and passive.

This radical new way of being has the power and eternity of God in it, it can bear all things, it can believe all things, it can hope all things, it can endure all things, anything, everything. Because love—this mysterious essence of God—this absolute foundation of the universe and of human life—this love never ends. And when somehow, by God's good grace, the community does it, embodies the reality of God's love, a miracle

happens: it becomes the Body of Christ, the Church.

> **“None of us,” Barbar Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, says “None of us is strong enough to keep loving God in those dark nights of the soul when it feels as if God doesn’t care about our pain and may even be causing it…Every believer at some time has felt abandoned by God.”**

…Words which captured the spirit of many of us on and after September 11.

“In such moments, when God is far away, when our faith is weak or non-existent…In moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God who, in tough times, keep the faith.”

And I thought of one of our members who died a few years ago of AIDS, who was in church regularly and faithfully as long as he was able. It is an important reminder: I keep a picture of him so I don’t forget him, or what he said and taught me about the church — because even ministers sometimes wonder about

it and are tempted to think that real religion is a private personal spirituality.

When he could no longer attend worship, Glenn listened to the Sunday morning worship service tapes. Near the end he was in a hospice facility and on one of my last visits he talked about his life and death> It was the week or so before Easter. The “Big One” he called it. The one we all need to hear. I asked him, “What’s the hardest part?” He told me that it was hard to fall asleep at night. He was so sick and at

night when all the guests and family had gone home, he felt alone with his pain and his weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I get out my tape player and put on my ear phones and listen to the Sunday worship service. I must have a hundred tapes. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep during the prelude or anthem and often during your sermon (I'm not the only one who does that!)…but almost every night I go to sleep that way — here in bed, but also in my church."

St. Paul said, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” You — Bethany Presbyterian Church — in your 50th year are that more excellent way, love’s embodiment.

Love that bears all things,

Believes all things,

Hopes all things,

Endures all things,

Love that never ends.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.